

Frank Chacksfield (1914-95)



Frank Chacksfield was once a famous name. In the 1950s and 1960s his music was a mainstay of the BBC Light Programme – easy-listening music played by a 40-piece orchestra that both reflected but also led the current popular musical fashions, before they were rivalled and then obliterated by the arrival of rock and other styles from 1956 onwards. Today Chacksfield's work would be profoundly unfashionable: the sounds of a near-contemporary Mantovani, for example, are reputed to clear the room. Nevertheless Chacksfield continued to record until the 1990s.

Chacksfield was a good pianist who started early, not only playing at local festivals but being deputy organist at Salehurst parish church. He came from Battle, being born there on 9 May 1914. His father, Charles Thomas, is in the 1911 census as a motor mechanic living at 19 Mount Street (in 1901 his description was collar maker). He had been born at Small Hythe, just inside Kent, the son of Charles, described in the 1901 census (at Little Park) as an *odd man (domestic)*. Like almost all men of his generation, Frank's father served in the First World War, joining up in December 1915. His mechanical knowledge made him suitable to be a driver in the Army Service Corps. Sent to France in September 1916, he suffered various illnesses but was not discharged until late in 1919. Charles married Alice Evans of Eastry in Kent in 1912 (her father had been a professional soldier who died when Alice was only a few months old), and Frank was their only child. Charles died at 5 Wellington Gardens, Battle in 1944, aged only 57; Alice lived to 1957, and also died at Battle.

Frank's father Charles had siblings Emily and George. Emily married Alexander Jenner at Battle in 1913; they had one son, who in turn married; he and his wife died childless at Battle. George married Annie Parsons at Battle in 1918; they had no children. He died at Brown Bread Street in 1962, and Annie in 1981. As Frank had no children there are no living descendants of father Charles.

Where Frank's musical talent came from is unknown. Of course, in earlier days those with such talent might be known locally but would have attracted wider mention only if taken up by someone aware of their promise. Frank started early, turning professional at the age of 22. When the war came in 1939 he joined the Signals but during an illness revealed himself as clearly an excellent pianist and was posted to ENSA. There he became a close colleague of the (now nearly forgotten) comic Charlie Chester. This gave him an entrée to the BBC after the war. Not only did he play, but he also composed and conducted. His music won awards both in the UK and elsewhere. His last record was issued in 1991. A golden disc is on display in Battle Museum.

Chacksfield married Jeanne Olga Lehmann at Battle in 1946; she died at Stone-cum-Ebony near Tenterden, in 1997. He developed Parkinson's disease and died at Farnborough (Kent) in 1995. He merited a long obituary in The Times.¹ Parts of it read:

Together with Mantovani and Semprini, Frank Chacksfield dominated the world of light orchestral music for more than four decades after the Second World War. His recordings of Limelight and Ebb Tide, featuring lavishly scored sweeping strings, remained in the hit parade on both sides of the Atlantic for most of 1953 with Ebb Tide becoming the first light orchestral recording to reach the number one spot in the United States

Frank Chacksfield and his orchestra made more than 150 long-playing albums over 25 years which were released in Japan, France, Germany and Australia as well as in Britain. His 35 albums for Decca alone are estimated to have achieved sales of more than 20 million.